

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 14WASHINGTON POST
PARADE MAGAZINE
27 March 1983

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Is The Peace Corps Obsolete?

REMEMBER THE PEACE CORPS? "Kennedy's Children" they were called in the early 1960s—young Americans imbued with idealism and hope who went forth into the underdeveloped countries of the world bringing with them 20th-century concepts of health, sanitation, nutrition and education.

The Peace Corps, like so many other noble concepts of the post-World War II era, isn't what it used to be. But even in its present form, necessarily more compact and curtailed than in the past, it is still filling a creative and constructive role and still attracting hundreds of bright, hardworking volunteers.

Today its membership consists of more than 5000 men and women serving in more than 60 countries—below previous peaks of 15,556 volunteers in 69 countries. Programs are more diversified and better planned than ever before. Perhaps most important of all, today's emphasis is on teaching and training people to help themselves—with the result that more and more Peace Corps workers are natives of the country being helped. Most Peace Corps projects are requested or initiated by the host country, and two-thirds of the Peace Corps staffs consist of host-country nationals.

Rick Abell, the Peace Corps director of programs, says: "Rather than dominate a native culture, our job is to be a catalyst for positive change within the local culture. For a project to succeed, the biggest change must come with the local villagers saying, 'I can do it! I can make a constructive change in my life and for my descendants.' Then the village can take charge of the project, and our volunteers will have accomplished their task of becoming intentionally obsolete."

Right now, however, no one connected with the corps regards it as verging on a state of obsolescence. Instead, the volunteers see themselves as an important part of American foreign policy, doing a job more important than ever in a world of international tensions, dwindling resources and unstable economies.

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Requests for teachers is a major demand on the Peace Corps. From 1961 to 1981, the Peace Corps contributed 62,951 classroom work-years to 4,721,400 Third World students. In 1980, the worldwide demand for educators was 50% higher than the Peace Corps could fill. To make best use of volunteers, the emphasis of its education programs has shifted from direct classroom work to training more host-country nationals to become teachers.

Though the Peace Corps' work has been widely respected by host-country governments and appreciated by the communities it serves, a number of skeptics and opponents have accused volunteers of espionage or CIA complicity. But Senate investigations have never found any evidence of Peace Corps association with U.S. intelligence operations. Congress strongly supports prohibitions of any relationship between CIA and Peace Corps personnel. Before they are accepted, employees are checked to make sure they have never been involved with the CIA in any way.

Though most volunteers have found their experience rewarding, some have found it not for them. In the last five years, 33% of volunteers have extended for a third year, while 30% terminated before their two-year commitment was completed. There is the risk of being robbed or raped, of health problems, job dissatisfaction, loneliness. From 1961 to 1981, 160 volunteers died during service. A critical deficiency that PARADE observed is the lack of protection or self-defense preparation for some volunteers, especially inexperienced women who are sent to live alone in situations better suited for a team.

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